**Christ the Worker: On God and Labour**

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**Labour Day weekend – Sept 4, 2016**

**Scripture: Genesis 3:8-24 and Romans 8:18-25**

We don’t usually speak about Labour Day on the Sunday of this September long weekend. I think in our minds, it’s a secular holiday, something to do with the ordinary, public realm of “the world” rather than “the church.” And hey, isn’t Sunday supposed to be the Sabbath, the day when we don’t work – or necessarily talk about work? Well, this morning, I want to explore the ways in which faith and our labour, God and work, are actually linked in our thoughts and actions – because there’s more of a connection than we sometimes realize. In other words, this Labour Day Sunday, I want to explore our theology of labour.

When I think about our theology – or theologies – of work, something that surfaces immediately to my mind is the so-called “Protestant work ethic,” the idea among Protestants that it is their God-given duty to work hard and contribute to their families and society – an ethic than undergirds much of the way we view work in the North American, late capitalist context. The question “what do you do?” is the first one which we ask people whom we are meeting for the first time and getting to know. The underlying assumption is “what do you do as a paid job?” or “what do you do for a living?” – as if the point of life is to work in this sense, to be a “productive” or “contributing” member of society. In some ways, the Mennonite tradition has historically stressed hard work just as much – if not more – as mainline Protestant traditions, as various governments allowed us to enter or remain in their territories despite our peace stance and refusal to serve in the military because of our reputation as hard workers – predominantly as farmers and businesspeople and homemakers. More recently, as we’ve become more urbanized, there remains a certain value placed on working hard and being successful at one’s work – as evidenced by the many demanding careers represented in this congregation. I found a joke which goes, “Hard work never killed anyone – but why take the chance?” While we as Mennonites might find this funny, maybe it doesn’t resonate so much with many of our experiences and perspectives on work.

But we have to look carefully at these terms and the underlying assumptions. To speak of a Protestant work ethic implies that work defined in this particular way is in itself ethical. But what about people who are unable to work due to disabilities or other circumstances? What about those who are retired, like many of you here this morning, who are often busier volunteering and contributing to your communities than when you were officially working in careers? What about those who stay at home parenting children or doing other unpaid work – often work which has traditionally been the domain of women? Are we assuming too quickly, as we follow the trajectory of the Protestant work ethic, that only paid work is valuable or “productive”? We have to be careful about falling into these sorts of assumptions.

As someone who has just recently begun working in my first salaried job (after over a decade of university, piecemeal contract work, and the difficult but completely unpaid work of parenting), I’m by no means an expert. But I have had a lot of time to think – and to think theologically – about the meaning of our labour. Now I’m using the word labour intentionally here because its meaning is broader than the word work: it implies both our daily labour as well as the life-giving process of childbirth, which is also, of course, hard work.

This double sense of labour is more in keeping with how the Bible speaks about work, but that’s not to say that the Bible is straightforward on this topic! In fact, I’d say the Bible presents us with a somewhat contradictory message about our labour. As we heard in the passage from Genesis 3, labour is linked in the biblical text to the curse handed down to Adam and Eve after their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. In other words, work is linked to a punishment for the first human sin.

After Adam and Eve have admitted to God what they have done (or rather, blamed each other and the serpent for what they have done), God first pits Eve’s children against the serpent’s children, saying to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Then God says to Eve, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” In the text, we’re told that God curses this particular form of women’s labour, making it painful and difficult (3:16). As for Adam, God says to him, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:17-19).

So what are we to make of this? Is work really a curse placed upon us because of sin? Is it a form of atonement for falling short of following God’s ways? This link with sin certainly explains the compulsion to work within the Protestant work ethic, at least in part. There is a strong sense of the power of sin in mainline Protestant traditions, sometimes bordering on overemphasizing our powerlessness in the face of sin (as in the “total depravity” perspective on sin). And maybe this is why Jesus calls his disciples away from their work as fishers, etc. at the start of his ministry in the New Testament – could he be calling them away from the curse of work into new life in the reign of God?

Well, I don’t think it’s that simple. We can’t straightforwardly equate labour with the curse of sin. After all, there was already work going on in the world before we get to this passage from Genesis 3! The Bible begins with God laboring, God at work, doing the work of creation. At the start of Genesis 2, we are told, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day, God finished the work that [God] had done, and [God] rested on the seventh day from all the work that [God] had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that [God] had done in creation” (Gen. 2:1-3). This also implies that humanity, Adam and Eve, are made in the image of a laboring God, as God calls them to be fruitful and multiply and to care for creation, which will in turn provide food and thus care for them in return. So before sin or “the Fall,” there is already labour. The difference, though, is the sense of relationship with God, nature, and each other, even the sacred cycle of labour and rest established by God in the Sabbath. And if we look again at the “curses” in Genesis 3, that’s what stands out – the broken relationships, the alienation which results from sin – nature in the form of the serpent and the ground itself are “cursed” and alienated from humanity; Adam and Eve experience brokenness between the two of them and their own forms of labour; and of course, there is brokenness in their relationship with God as they are sent out of the paradise of the Garden. And yet, we are told that God clothes them before they go, so they are not completely cut off from God’s loving care.

So it’s not all work that is cursed – it is only the type of work which alienates us from God, creation, each other, and ourselves, only the type of work which leads to broken relationships. One of my favourite theologians, Dorothee Soelle, speaks about this type of work as “alienated labour,” using the image of a person on a treadmill (sort of like a hamster wheel!). Reflecting on the type of work which arose during the industrial revolution, Soelle explains it this way:

“The treadmill stands for any monotonous round of duties that we must accomplish, but it is an especially apt image for those who are confined to repetitive, routine, unsatisfying jobs… We behold the work process, but no product is visible, which means that even the joy of producing something is snatched from the worker. This is the touchstone of alienated labour: the worker does not envision the work, does not plan the product he or she creates. The kind of seeing essential to good work, in which the worker envisions something prior to creating it, is obliterated . . . Those who produce are alienated from the fruit of their labor.”

The alienated worker also has no control over his or her time, and is placed into competition with rather than in cooperation or community with other workers. “Giving and taking are squashed by the treadmill. The person in the treadmill can learn nothing. He [or she] does not grow through work, does not change through work. The creature in the treadmill only gets exhausted.” She concludes, “Most people have to live like that. They are forced to live beneath their own level of physical, emotional, rational, and spiritual endowments. As the treadmill figure attests, people are crippled, bent, reduced on the gallows of work.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Soelle importantly reminds us that for many people in the world, work is, in fact, a curse or a burden – there is this type of alienated labour, as well as child labour, sweatshop labour, and other forms of unjust or slave labour which still exist today. This is a broken kind of work which is not life-giving, and this experience of labour is an ongoing reality for too many people in our globalized capitalist economy.

So what, then, is the alternative? If we were to return to the type of labour to which God calls us in the beginning, what would that look like? It’s interesting to remember that the first kinds of work God calls us to are gardening and parenting/caregiving – two types of labour which aren’t rewarded very well in our society, at least not financially! Along these lines, Soelle speaks of meaningful labour as involving “self-expression,” creativity, and imagination; as fostering relationship and community; and as “reconciliation with nature.”[[2]](#footnote-2) So it’s creative, relational, and reconciles us with creation. Furthermore, when we participate in this kind of labour, according to Soelle, we are imaging God – this is the type of labour which God as Creator and as Incarnate one – Emmanuel, God-with-us – exemplifies. To quote Soelle again, “When God, incarnate in Jesus, became a worker, our understanding of work was finally freed from the tradition of the curse. The new dignity of the worker appears in this gospel of work.”[[3]](#footnote-3) On our bulletins today, I included an icon of “Christ the worker,” which depicts Christ with work-worn hands, wearing an apron, that symbol of domestic, homemaking work as well as manual labour. It follows the ancient Christian tradition which holds that before beginning his ministry at age 30, Jesus worked as a carpenter in Nazareth with his father, Joseph. But aside from this tradition, we also read in the Bible of Jesus’ work as a teacher, preacher, prophet, healer, counselor, miracle-worker, cook and host, etc. When he calls his disciples away from their work as fishers, tax collectors, and so on, he calls them to a different, less conventional, unpaid form of labour – to be fishers of people. In other words, he calls them to this alternative understanding of work which is creative, relational, and reconciles us with God and Creation. This kind of work is good, and meaningful, and can even give us joy. So God doesn’t curse us to work, but cares about our work, about our working conditions, about just and meaningful labour practices. This is why groups like the Catholic Worker Movement – started by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin during the Great Depression to help the many who found themselves out of work and destitute, promoting fair labour practices and pacifism. Interestingly, in Minnepolis, there is a Mennonite Worker house built on similar ideas, living and working in intentional community and voluntary poverty and working for peace and justice in their community. The fair trade movement is another example of efforts to have faith impact labour practices, and of course Ten Thousand Villages is a great example of that. These movements are the theology of Christ the worker in action. In these ways, the image of Christ as worker reminds us that our God is not aloof and indifferent, but Emmanuel, God-with-us – God who isn’t afraid to become involved in our everyday, to get God’s hands dirty, to put on the apron and join in, who became one of us, laboring alongside us to create a new way of life.

And that’s the thing about parenting/caregiving and gardening, those two original forms of labour God calls us to in the Garden of Eden – they’re both life-giving forms of labour, something also explored in Romans 8. There, we read about that other form of labour, the labour of childbirth. Starting in verse 19, we read that “creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (vv. 19-21). Notice, again, that it’s not only human beings who are “subjected” and in “bondage” to futility, meaninglessness, decay, but also creation. As in Genesis 3, human sin is broken relationship with God, each other, and creation itself. Our earth is hurting, in part because of our unjust and destructive labour practices. We – and creation – are waiting for this situation to be redeemed, for liberation from this brokenness. But this is no ordinary waiting – Paul writes that it is the kind of waiting that happens during labour, during the process of childbirth. Picking up again in verse 22: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved” (vv.22-24a).

Though we are waiting alongside creation for the new creation of redemption, it is not a hopeless kind of waiting. It is the kind of waiting experienced in childbirth – the active, laboring waiting for the sake of birthing new life! Having experienced this process myself, I can say that it’s more than a little disconcerting – even traumatic! Of course, Paul isn’t saying that this kind of waiting is easy – he’s speaking to the persecuted early church, after all, but he does use this kind of labour as a metaphor for our working together with God for redemption, for new life and a new creation. This is the image he uses to talk about our hope that we and creation need not be subjected to meaningless labour or meaningless suffering, but that we can labour with God in a way that is life-giving, in the way that childbirth is literally labour for the sake of new life.

So as we celebrate Labour Day this weekend, I invite us to think about labour in a new way. Let’s not fall into the traps of the Protestant work ethic, which narrows work to questions of pay or status, which locks us into compulsive work as a curse and a burden. Instead, let’s remember Christ the worker, the one who shows us the way of meaningful labour – labour which is creative, relational, and reconciles us with creation. Let us remember that in the beginning, God labored to create the world and rested – and called us to life-giving work and rest. Let us live in the hope that we can co-create with God, together laboring and giving birth to a new creation where all people can live in justice and peace with God, each other, and creation.

AMEN

1. Dorothee Soelle, with Shirley A. Cloyes, *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 56-57. Cf. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Soelle, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Soelle, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)